Mad about modular

By Sarah Etter, News Reporter

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When overcrowding in California corrections facilities started cutting into space for educational and vocational programming, California Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections officials didn't get mad. They got modular.

The California Prison Industry Authority, which operates job opportunities for CDRC offenders, unveiled The Modular Building Enterprise on September 12th at Folsom State Prison. The mods, the PIA's newest undertaking, are a vocational solution to the same space crunch many states are facing.

"At this point, we're running 200 percent over capacity," says PIA General Manager Matt Powers. "We are dealing with 16,000 inmates who are in unconventional sleeping situations; they are sleeping in hallways, classrooms and gymnasiums. It's creating a huge strain on vocational, medical, and educational space."

Step One: Lay out sidings and frames.

The construction of the modulars is part of an inmate pre-apprenticeship called Career Technical Education Carpentry, created by a partnership with California's Carpenters Local 46 Regional Counsel, the PIA and the Northern California Carpenters Regional Counsel.

Step Two: Weld framework and siding.

Training for the inmates includes classroom instruction and hands-on learning in the factory. Inmates are only eligible for the program if they have a GED or are working towards one. As an added incentive, the PIA covers union dues and also provides each inmate with a set of tools.

“We’re essentially investing in the future of these inmates,” Powers says. “We’re giving them the tools they need, literally, to go back into their communities and find employment.”

After inmates become familiar with hammers, nails and assembly-lines, they are eligible to work in a full-scale apprenticeship program, which leads to jobs with CA construction companies who hire union workers.

Step Three: Erect frames.

During the pre-apprenticeship, Carpenters Local 46 workers teach the inmates how to weld, install plumbing and electricity, and bolt the mods together. Additionally, inmates working for the Enterprise program become certified by the American Welding Society , which helps build offender resumes pre-release.

“The community tie-in is a real key,” says Frank Losco, spokesperson for the PIA. “The community is helping us improve this process because it offers incentives to the inmates. We really made sure there was a market for these skills. We wanted to

fulfill a need in the community."

The modular buildings are each crafted out of metal frames, which are placed into cement foundations. Then, the mods are stucco-ed to increase durability. Each mod offers 10 by 20 square feet of space, but they can be connected to create areas of up to 600 square feet.

Step Four: Stucco siding for durability.

"Currently, it takes about two weeks to create one mod," says Powers. "We desperately need the space, and the inmates are doing a great job. But what makes this project so compelling are the community partnerships and the vocational opportunity it gives to our inmates."

So far, 8 mods have been created, and officials are excited to see the rollout of even more. The mods are constructed in a new factory, where inmates work on them assembly-line style.

The Mod Enterprise program started up last year, when PIA officials proposed the concept to an eleven-member board at the CDCR. The pilot program, which has been in place for the last five months, has been a success. Currently, eighty offenders are enrolled in the pre-apprenticeship program and Powers says that number will triple once the project is up and running.

Step Five: The finished product.

“Our inmates are delighted to work for PIA and to learn new things,” says Powers. “And we’re thrilled to create much needed space with the help of our offenders.”

Bottom Line: As California gears up to get even more mod and increases programming space, inmates are picking up crucial carpentry skills that will result in employment post-release.